

Contact experiences and needs of children of prisoners before and during COVID-19: Findings from an Australian survey

Catherine Flynn¹  | Lorana Bartels²  | Susan Dennison³  | Helen Taylor²  |
Susy Harrigan¹ 

¹Department of Social Work, Monash University, Caulfield East, Victoria, Australia

²Centre for Social Research and Methods, Australian National University, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia

³School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

Correspondence

Catherine Flynn, Department of Social Work, Monash University, Room C 4.07, Level 4, Building C, Caulfield Campus, 900 Dandenong Road, Caulfield East, VIC 3145, Australia.
Email: catherine.flynn@monash.edu

Abstract

Most of the research examining children visiting a parent in prison indicates that visits have a positive impact on children's well-being, their connection to the imprisoned parent and the parent themselves. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a significant change to prison visits worldwide, with limits or bans on face-to-face contact. Understanding the experiences and needs of children during this period remains limited. This paper presents the findings of a survey of 84 carers of 184 children across Australia, investigating children's experiences of contact with their imprisoned parent both before and during COVID-19 restrictions. Although most carers reported maintaining contact during restrictions, a range of difficulties were noted: reduced availability; the effect of prison-based issues, including lockdowns; and the suitability of video/telephone visits for young children. Some described the benefits of videoconferencing, including reduced travel time and cost, and not needing to take children into a prison environment. Despite this, respondents typically described the negative impact of restrictions, and lack of physical contact, on children's emotional well-being. Our findings suggest that, for video visiting to be successful, it should be complementary to in-person visits, tailored to the needs of children, with support offered to families.

KEYWORDS

Australia, children, COVID-19, pandemic, parenting, prison visits

1 | INTRODUCTION

Previous research has examined children visiting parents and other family members in prison. This has predominantly focused on describing the extent of visiting; the barriers to visiting, including the nature of visiting conditions; and, more recently, the effects of visiting on outcomes for the imprisoned person, notably recidivism. There has been limited attention given to the visiting experiences, particularly of children, in Australia in recent years. What is indicated, however, is that visiting can have a positive impact on children's well-being and their connection to the imprisoned parent.

In 2020, prison visiting across the globe was significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Australia, like many places worldwide, this involved heightened restrictions on movement within prisons and

the cessation of in-person visits for varied periods of time, in an attempt to keep COVID-19 out of the prison population. Formal understanding of the impact of the pandemic on prisoners and their families and their coping during imprisonment remains limited. This paper begins to fill this gap by presenting the findings of an online survey, conducted between 17 June and 17 August 2020, with 84 carers of 184 children with a family member in prison in Australia.

2 | VISITING FAMILY MEMBERS IN PRISON

Children who have a parent in prison are typically cared for informally, within their nuclear or extended family, with paternal imprisonment

commonly resulting in caregiving by mothers (Flynn, 2013). What is known about these families is that psychological, social and economic stress is common; this is then exacerbated by the 'costs' of imprisonment, including reduced work and/or income and the additional costs of financially supporting the imprisoned person (Arditti et al., 2003; Trotter et al., 2015). It is perhaps then unsurprising that only about half of all imprisoned parents receive visits from their children (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010). This has an impact on family connectedness and can affect parents' ability to parent or remain involved with their child during and after prison (Arditti et al., 2005). Specific barriers to visiting have been identified in relation to 'getting there' or 'being there' (Flynn, 2014). The known, intersecting, challenges to 'getting there' relate to distance and cost. Research describes prisoners being held long distances from their homes (e.g. see Pierce, 2015), creating additional financial and time stress for families when visiting (Dennison et al., 2014; Pierce, 2015; Scharff Smith & Jakobsen, 2014). Although this pattern has been described across a range of countries, it has particular relevance to Australia, in jurisdictions with low populations in a large geographical area (e.g. Dennison et al., 2014). Additional costs associated with visiting, including the need to purchase expensive and unhealthy food from vending machines, as well as food during the journey to the prison, have also been reported anecdotally and observed by some of the authors in practice.

Families who overcome these barriers still need to confront and negotiate 'complex administrative procedures and regulations' (Ryan et al., 2020, p. 1059), including criminal history and identity checks, booking systems, clothing requirements and drug detection procedures, before they are allowed entry to the prison. They are then confronted with an environment commonly described as hostile and intimidating (e.g. see Scharff Smith & Jakobsen, 2014), lacking appropriate child-friendly facilities (Bartlett & Eriksson, 2018) and privacy (Pierce, 2015). As argued by Ryan et al. (2020, p. 1059), '[p]risons are not designed with visitors in mind'. The provision of poor visiting facilities has resulted in some imprisoned parents not wanting visits to occur (Dennison et al., 2017). Additionally, strained family relationships, and hostility between ex-partners, may result in carers not being willing to bring children to visit—gatekeeping parent–child contact (Tasca, 2016). More recent research (Arditti et al., 2021) has highlighted the complexity and shifting nature of these relationships, and how mothers in particular are actively engaged in both *motherwork* and *prisonwork*, making decisions which balance protecting children and supporting the incarcerated person.

Beckmeyer and Arditti (2014, p. 130) described face-to-face, in-person visits as the 'most proximal form of contact' for families. What this contact actually looks like, however, varies considerably by jurisdiction, the institution's level of security and the security classification/risk of the prisoner, and the architecture itself. Face-to-face visits can include standard visits, with minimal physical contact; extended family visits; child-only visits; and box/non-contact visits.

For children, visiting allows them to see and communicate directly with their family member, reducing fears for safety and wellbeing (Flynn, 2014). Horgan and Poehlmann-Tynan (2020, p. 400) claimed that '[c]ontact visits, when the parent and child can see each other in

person and can hug and hold hands, are the most meaningful form of social interaction supporting family relationships'. Such contact also allows parents and children to either continue, or work on rebuilding, their relationships (Tasca, 2018), which may result in better adjustment for children (e.g. see Trice & Brewster, 2004). This is not to suggest that all contact is beneficial, however, with a range of factors influencing the contact experience. Prison visitation policies, practices and environments can be detrimental for children (Arditti, 2003; Poehlmann et al., 2010). Prison visits may also be traumatizing for children who do not want to leave their incarcerated parent at the end of the visit (Arditti & Few, 2008). Interviews with the children of imprisoned fathers also reveal that many felt fearful about visiting the prison and some did not feel safe there, feared the other prisoners or, in cases of domestic violence, feared visiting their incarcerated parent (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008). However, when the child has a positive relationship with the parent and where visits provide for meaningful contact in a safe environment, it is generally understood that visits are good for children, families, those in prison and the prison itself.

There are also a range of ways that non-contact connections can be maintained between imprisoned parents and their families, including letter-writing, phone calls and email. In Australia, phone calls can only be made by the prisoner out to the family, not in. All methods are typically limited, in terms of frequency and time; are costly; and are subject to surveillance. Pre-pandemic, Cramer et al. (2017) identified video visits as offering the opportunity to address key challenges with visiting, notably distance and cost. Turanovic and Tasca (2019) suggested that this type of visiting may also reduce the risk of secondary prisonization, by virtue of avoiding the physical prison environment. However, little is known about video visits. In Australia, research in Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) on responses to children when their primary carer was imprisoned indicated that only one out of 151 parents interviewed in 2012–2014 had accessed this type of visit, despite this service reportedly being on offer in both states (Trotter et al., 2015).

In the United States, by contrast, video visits have been in place, and growing, over the past decade. In 2015, such visits were reportedly being trialled in more than 500 prisons/jails across 44 states/districts, although some visitors still have to travel to the prison setting to engage in a video visit (Rabuy & Wagner, 2015). Practical challenges with these visits are also emphasized, such as poor quality, cost and availability, as well as visits ending abruptly (Cramer et al., 2017). Rabuy and Wagner (2015) described some jails using video visits, then banning face-to-face visits, as part of the contract with the company providing the video visit technology. Horgan and Poehlmann-Tynan (2020) described considerable backlash against this, noting that some US states have now legislated to ensure that video contact cannot replace face-to-face visits. They contended, however, that video chat may be an effective and developmentally appropriate means of contact for children with imprisoned parents, where face-to-face visits are not possible. They suggested that the visual element of this medium creates more meaningful contact than the telephone for children under 8 years, who may not have the verbal and cognitive abilities required to engage by telephone, without visual cues and facial

expressions. They also suggested that video chat can create a greater sense of physical closeness at a distance.

3 | COVID-19 AND PRISON

COVID-19 spread across the globe from early 2020 and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020. The WHO (2020) also provided guidance on preventing and responding to COVID-19 in prisons, noting the potential for 'huge mortality rates' (Summers, 2020, p. 1). Concerns were noted at that time about the challenges presented by both the environment and the prison population. Prisons are commonly overcrowded; in Australia, the average occupancy level is 112% (World Prison Brief, 2020). Hence, these environments bring inherent difficulties in prevention, adequate hygiene, physical distancing and infection control. People held in prison also face specific risks, with compromised health, chronic health conditions, increased rates of mental illness and substance dependence, increasing their vulnerability to COVID-19 (Prison Reform International, 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, there were about 44 000 people in prison in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2020). Although there has since been a small decrease in the prison population (ABS, 2021), unlike many countries, Australia did see significant numbers of people released from prison as a result of the pandemic. It should be noted that Australia has been less affected by the pandemic than most countries (e.g. see Worldometer, 2021); during 2020, the majority of cases were overseas travellers who were placed in hotel quarantine upon arrival to Australia. Only a very small number of cases of COVID have occurred among both prisoners and prison staff in some jurisdictions (e.g. see Gibson & Hynninen, 2020; for discussion of the impact of COVID on prison policy and practice in Australia generally, see Anthony et al., Forthcoming).

In March 2020, across all Australian state and territory correctional centres, in-person visits were cancelled (for an overview of the restrictions imposed in each jurisdiction, see Anthony et al., Forthcoming; Australian Capital Territory Inspector of Correctional Services, 2020). Alternative forms of communication between prisoners and their families were utilized, including phone calls and video visits. In most correctional centres, this involved a rapid upgrade of facilities and changes to procedures to enable videoconferencing with family members for the first time, including a trial using computer tablets in NSW (Fitzgerald, 2020).

Though there are no national figures of the number of parents in prison in Australia, about 38% of people entering prison in Australia are estimated to have children in the community who were dependent on them for their basic needs (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2019). Formal understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on prisoners and their families and their coping during imprisonment is understandably in its early phases. This article begins to fill this research gap by examining children's experience of, and changes to, contact with a family member in prison, as reported by caregivers during the period when prisons were closed to visitors. Although

correctional services are operated separately in Australia by the eight states and territories and there was some variation in their responses to COVID, all had suspended face-to-face contact during the period of our data collection.

4 | METHODOLOGY

This project received ethics approval from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. To understand how families with children experienced contact during the period of suspended visits, an online survey was developed in conjunction with SHINE for Kids, a non-government (NGO) organization that supports the families of people in prison. The survey was distributed to adults caring for children with a relative in prison via SHINE for Kids, other not-for-profit support organizations and social media platforms. It is likely that recruitment, via support services, affected the study sample, with respondents being more likely to be in contact with their imprisoned family member.

The survey was available from 17 June to 17 August 2020 and collected information from 84 respondents, in relation to 184 children, with representation across all states and territories. Respondents were asked about their experiences of visiting before and during the COVID-19 restrictions, with regard to:

- access to and the types of visits;
- the challenges in maintaining contact;
- factors affecting visiting;
- perceptions of the availability and quality of contact between the child(ren) and imprisoned family member;
- self-reported coping, as well as observations on how both the child(ren) and imprisoned family member were coping; and
- suggestions for improvements to visiting.

For analytic purposes, we present the data about the eldest child in each family (the 'principal child'). Data were analysed using univariate descriptive analysis, as well as Fisher's exact test for examining associations between key categorical variables and McNemar's test for change in respondents' perceptions of contact availability and quality of interaction before and during COVID-19 (for this latter test, responses were collapsed into good/very good and poor/very poor). A small number of questions sought open-ended, qualitative responses. Content analysis was chosen to analyse these responses, as this approach is the most suitable for mapping data, particularly where structured questions are used, where the aim is to systematically describe and quantify trends (Bryman, 2015). Given the focus on descriptive and manifest content, one coder completed this task.

Most respondents (85.5%) reported on visiting patterns both before and during COVID-19, as their family member had been in prison before March 2020. Nearly all respondents were women (98.8%, $n = 83$), and most were the mother of the child(ren) they were caring for (83.3%), whereas the imprisoned person was the child(ren)'s father. The next most common caring role was grandparent (8.3%).

The most common respondent age group was 30–39 (40.5%), followed by 20–29 (32.1%). Most respondents (83.0%) identified as non-Indigenous. Whereas few identified as having any type of disability or chronic illness (4.8%), 16.7% ($n = 14$) of their children were described as needing regular help with daily activities, due to disability or chronic illness. This is considerably higher than in the community population, where 7.4% of children aged 0–14 have some type of disability (AIHW, 2020).

Table 1 displays the characteristics of the principal child for each respondent/family.

As shown in Table 1, almost 60% of children were male, 32.1% were aged 5–9 and 30.9% were under school age. Almost one-third (30.9%) were Indigenous, mirroring their persistent over-representation in the Australian prison system (ABS, 2020). A small percentage (6.0%) usually spoke a language other than English. In addition, for 16 children (19.0%), the imprisoned person had been the primary carer.

5 | FINDINGS

5.1 | Contact prior to COVID-19 restrictions

Of the 75 respondents whose family member was in prison pre-COVID-19, most ($n = 65$; 86.7%) stated that they had no problems with visiting before the COVID-19 restrictions. This is highly unexpected, given the well-established research, both in Australia and

internationally, indicating that visiting is problematic. There are some possible methodological explanations for this. Firstly, the timing and focus of the survey. It may be that respondents were focused on their experiences during COVID-19 and completed the survey during the height of the restrictions, at a time of considerable stress, which may have made any previous difficulties seem less important. Secondly, given our recruitment strategies, it is possible that those who completed the survey were those in contact with support services and were receiving assistance to maintain contact, missing out on those for whom pre-COVID barriers to visiting had a significant impact. However, we cannot confirm these speculations. Ten respondents identified multiple problems with visiting prior to COVID-19. These were distance to prison and cost of transport (both $n = 7$), visits too stressful and unable to come at visiting times (both $n = 3$), lack of transport and other issues (both $n = 2$) and prison lockdowns ($n = 1$).

Given what is known about challenges for families of getting to visits (e.g. see Flynn, 2014), it is unsurprising that the main issues were about distance and the cost of transport. Although only a small number of respondents noted travel as a problem, this issue was also captured elsewhere in the survey; 41.7% ($n = 35$) of respondents indicated that they were travelling at least 2 h to get to the prison for visits. It was further noted that only 55.6% of this group were frequent visitors, compared with 87.5% of those whose travel was under 2 h ($P = 0.008$).

The survey also sought to determine how families maintained contact before the COVID-19 restrictions, with a specific focus on the type of contact (face-to-face and other). Of the 75 respondents whose family member was in prison pre-COVID-19, 10 (13.3%) reported that no visits took place. Of those who did visit with children, contact consisted predominantly of face-to-face visits ($n = 64$; 98.5%). Other types of contact included supported play ($n = 9$; 13.8%), box visits ($n = 2$; 3.1%) and 'other' types of visits ($n = 4$; 6.2%). Four respondents (5.3%) reported that no other types of contact took place between children and their imprisoned family member.

Seventy-one respondents (94.7%) reported on other forms of contact pre-COVID. Of these, most reported phone calls as an alternative form of contact ($n = 68$; 95.8%), followed by letters ($n = 42$; 59.2%). Skype (the type of videoconferencing then generally in use in Australian prisons) was not used at all, although one respondent (1.4%) reported using some other undescribed form of contact.

We sought to understand how well-prepared respondents felt for the changes to visiting, as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, by asking them to rate the information they received from the prison about these changes. The vast majority (78.0%, $n = 82$) reported that the information from the prison about the changes was either very poor ($n = 43$; 52.4%) or poor ($n = 21$; 25.6%). Whereas 20.7% ($n = 17$) felt the quality of information was good, only 1.2% ($n = 1$) considered it very good.

5.2 | Contact during COVID-19 restrictions

After visits were suspended as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, 50 respondents (59.5%) noted some problems with keeping in

TABLE 1 Characteristics of principal child under respondent's care

Characteristics	<i>n</i> (%)
Sex	
Female	34 (40.5)
Male	50 (59.5)
Age	
<2 years	10 (11.9)
2–4 years	16 (19.0)
5–9 years	27 (32.1)
10–14 years	16 (19.0)
15–17 years	15 (17.9)
Indigenous status ^a	
Indigenous	26 (30.9)
Non-Indigenous	56 (66.7)
Assistance required with daily activities due to disability/chronic illness ^a	
Yes	14 (16.7)
No	68 (81.0)
Language other than English	
Yes	5 (6.0)
No	79 (94.0)

^aTwo respondents (2.4%) chose not to answer this question.

contact. These are summarized in Figure 1. Multiple responses were possible.

Of those describing problems, most reported multiple problems. As is evident from Figure 1, most of the identified problems related to prison facilities, including prison lockdowns ($n = 34$; 68.0%), shortened time for visits ($n = 33$; 66.0%) and poor/no access to video visits at the prison ($n = 25$; 50.0%). One-half of the respondents who indicated problems, however, described the children as not wanting to participate in non-face-to-face visits ($n = 25$). A small number of respondents noted 'other' issues, including poor communication from the prison about visiting and the impact of lack of physical contact for children.

Of the 84 respondents whose family member was imprisoned during-COVID-19, only four (4.8%) reported that no contact took place between children and their imprisoned family member. For those who reported contact during COVID-19, phone calls were the most common form of contact (91.3%), followed by video visits (75.0%). Regarding frequency of contact, two-thirds of the 65 pre-COVID-19 respondents reported that face-to-face visits occurred at least once a fortnight ($n = 43$; 66.1%), with just under 5% reported no regular visiting. The latter is considerably lower than reported in previous research on visiting. It is likely that, due to our survey recruitment procedures, the number of families not visiting prisoners is under-represented.

After visits were suspended, 81.3% ($n = 80$) reported having some contact at least every 2 weeks, but just under three-quarters of respondents (73.7%; $n = 59$) stated that the actual time available for contact between the principal child and imprisoned family member was less than before visiting restrictions were imposed. Further, almost three-quarters of respondents (71.6%) rated the *availability* of

contact as poor/very poor during the restrictions, compared with the one-third of respondents who rated availability of contact prior to COVID-19 in this way (32.0%). Qualitative data on shortened, and less frequent visits, are presented later. Change between the pre- and during COVID-19 ratings was tested using McNemar's test to assess the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the perception of contact availability. Two salient points are demonstrated here. Firstly, more than two-thirds (68.0%; $n = 34$) of the 50 respondents who rated contact availability as good/very good before the COVID-19 restrictions changed their ratings to poor/very poor. Conversely, only a minority (20.8%) of the 24 respondents who perceived contact availability as poor/very poor before COVID-19 changed their ratings to good/very good after COVID-19 restrictions. Overall, the data indicate more negative changes than positive changes. This is evident from the McNemar's test result ($P < 0.001$), which indicates that the change in the proportion of good/very good ratings following COVID-19 restrictions was statistically significant.

Ratings on the *quality* of contact before and after the restrictions were also captured in the survey. Similar to respondents' views on availability of contact pre-COVID, one-third (33.8%) rated quality as poor/very poor, whereas the remaining two-thirds (66.2%) rated it as good/very good. For the ratings during COVID-19 restrictions, exactly 50% rated the quality of interaction as poor/very poor, whereas the other half rated it as good or very good. The change between respondents' ratings was tested using McNemar's test to assess the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the perception of *quality* of interaction during contact.

Table 2 displays the change in participant ratings of contact quality before and after the restrictions. Interestingly, the pattern of change

FIGURE 1 Problems with maintaining contact after introduction of visit restrictions ($n = 50$)

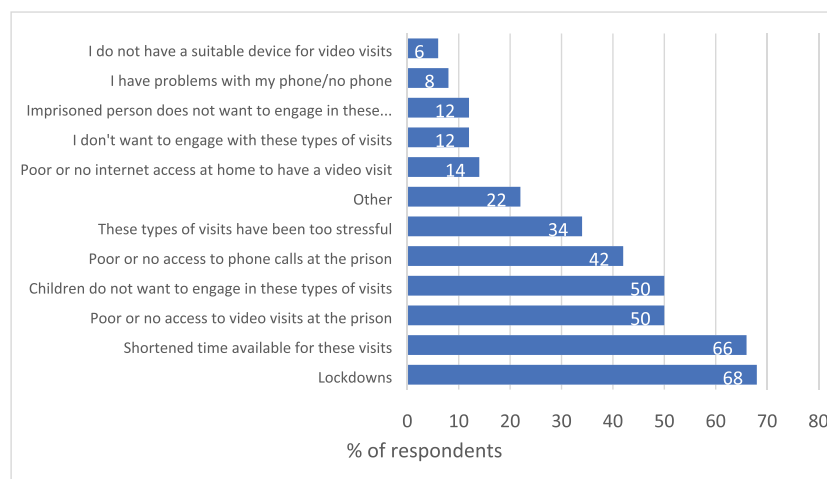


TABLE 2 Change in contact quality ratings: before versus during COVID ($n = 74$)

		During COVID		Total
		Poor/very poor	Good/very good	
Before COVID	Poor/very poor	13	12	25
	(% of pre-COVID ratings)	52.0%	48.0%	
	Good/very good	24	25	49
	(% of pre-COVID ratings)	49.0%	51.0%	

was quite different to that observed for *availability* of contact discussed above. McNemar's test indicated that the change in the proportion of good/very good ratings following the COVID-19 restrictions was not statistically significant ($P = 0.065$). As seen in Tables 2, 24 (49.0%) of the 49 respondents who rated the pre-COVID quality of interaction as good/very good changed their ratings to poor/very poor. A similar percentage (48.0%) of the 25 respondents who initially perceived the quality of interaction as poor/very poor changed their ratings to good/very good following the COVID-19 restrictions. Therefore, there were similar proportions of positive and negative changes.

Although just under three-quarters of respondents ($n = 61$, 72.6%) reported no positive elements to contact after visits were suspended, it is important to note that 27.3% ($n = 23$) did describe some positive aspects (multiple responses were possible). The latter are summarized in Figure 2, presented as number of respondents, due to the small size of this subgroup.

The main positives identified were the reduced time/cost involved, not needing to travel to the prison and subsequently not needing to take the children into a prison environment. Some identified that video visits were more private and less distracting for children than face-to-face contact in a visits centre. Eight respondents noted 'other' positives; these included children being able to show their parent things around the house, for example, pets, garden and activities; the imprisoned parent being able to participate

in the child's bedtime routine; and reduced concern about a child with a traumatic brain injury being 'restless and unsettled' during a visit.

5.3 | The effects of visiting restrictions on children

Respondents were asked to describe what they considered to be the effects of the COVID-19 prison visiting restrictions on the health and well-being of the children for whom they were caring. Seventy-six responses were provided; some indicated multiple effects on children. These responses were thematically analysed and are summarized in Figure 3.

Only two carers (2.6%) said the changes had no impact, whereas seven participants (9.2%) described some positive effects brought about by these changes, reflecting the data highlighted in Figure 3. These related to the children not having to travel to the prison:

They are much happier. They hated going to visit.
Hated the travel time. It was stressful and now no arguments to get them ready on the visit day

... they are less tired as we do not have to drive 4 hours each way in a day for an hour visit.

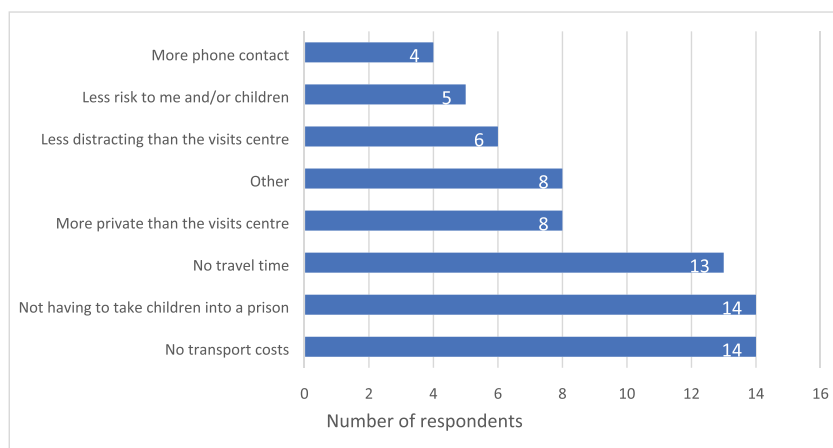


FIGURE 2 Positive aspects of maintaining contact after the introduction of prison visiting restrictions ($n = 23$)

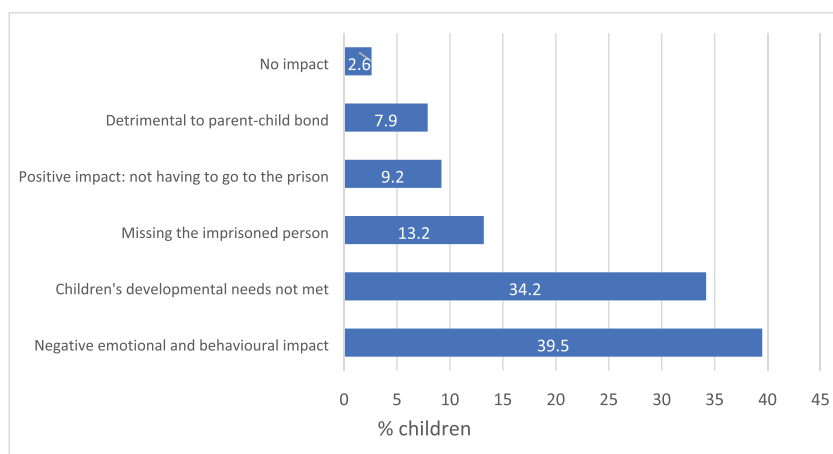


FIGURE 3 Effects of COVID-19 prison visiting restrictions on children ($n = 76$)

Some respondents considered it better for the children not to physically be in a prison environment:

Positive because it allows connection in a calm home setting for the child.

I think it's better for these kids because it's not triggering them having to go into a prison.

Two respondents described the additional opportunities that video visits offered:

The kids have been able to share more with their father such as reading stories together, showing him their awards and artwork.

They obviously miss the physical contact, but at the same time they get to interact with him in ways they cannot on a contact visit, they love being able to show him around the home.

However, almost all respondents (94.8%) described negative consequences for children as a result of the restricted visiting. Thirty (39.5%) described a negative emotional/behavioural impact on the child, including that the child was 'withdrawn, confused. Sad' or that no contact 'resulted in nightmares, bad sleeping patterns and depression'. Others emphasized the immediate effects on behaviour that video visits had:

My children are anxious and miss the face-to-face interactions with their dad. My son has had several meltdowns after video visits, as they often cut out and he does not get to see him.

More than one-third of respondents (34.2%) described the changed visiting conditions as not meeting children's needs, especially for younger children, reporting that '[t]he video visits are so short and my son finds that difficult to communicate on' or that 'phone calls aren't helpful [for a toddler] and he doesn't sit still for video calls'. Of this group, 16 respondents specifically described the perceived adverse impact on children of the lack of physical contact/touch. As one respondent explained:

Children are resilient but they miss holding and talking to their father. The youngest one cries after a talk on Zoom - she wants to hold him. The older one wants to hug him and play games with him - affection is very important and has been hard for them to not have it.

Another respondent described the difficulty experienced by the child in understanding the new restrictions on contact:

My daughter is struggling to understand why she cannot see her Dad, she was very close and affectionate with her Dad and now for the past few months she has not even been able to see or touch her Dad.

Some specifically noted that the lack of face-to-face contact was not only affecting the child, but the bond between the parent and child:

My kids are feeling very detached from their dad and do not even want to take his calls.

Not interacting with his father and not being able to build a relationship.

My son will lose the bond with his father and will not know who he is.

Respondents were asked to assess how well the children were coping with the changed prison contact arrangements, with 69% ($n = 55$) disagreeing/strongly disagreeing that the children were coping. The reasons identified for children not coping largely reflect the data provided about changed visiting conditions and the associated difficulties.

The first issue was the lack of physical contact:

Lack of physical contact with father. Feeling like their dad has died.

Not being able to hug her Dad. It's also hard for young children to maintain a conversation on an iPad especially when it freezes and her Dad cannot hear her.

Their dad does not know how to communicate in this way. He's awkward and then the kids do not want to visit with him.

The availability and consistency of contact for children was also an issue:

Only allowed one visit per week and before, when there were no visits at all, it has had long-lasting attachment issues on the child and she has ongoing trust issues and ongoing nightmares.

For some families, the changed visiting conditions meant no contact at all:

We have been waiting on approval for our visits to take place, now approved last week so can go to Zoom visit now (after 6 months) and they can be 30 minutes, if the regional Internet connection is adequate.

5.4 | What can be done to support children?

Seventy-seven people provided some response to this open question. Responses can be broadly categorized into re-institution of contact visits, improvements to non-contact visits and the provision of non-prison-based supports for children. These are summarized in Figure 4.

Despite 40% of respondents highlighting emotional and behavioural issues for children, few highlighted the need for psychological or social support for children; rather, most called for improved contact with the imprisoned person. Reintroduction of contact visits was the most commonly suggested action to support children during this time ($n = 35$; 45.5%). This is consistent with the findings noted earlier, with respondents highlighting the negative consequences for children of the lack of physical contact with the imprisoned person. On the other hand, respondents indicated that they were cognizant of the challenges faced by prisons. Some suggested that 'box' visits could be reintroduced or that families with small children could be prioritized for face-to-face contact; some noted that universal health precautions, such as temperature-checking visitors, could augment this. (Note: These suggestions were provided during the 2020 lockdown; some of these measures were subsequently implemented in some jurisdictions.)

Improving non-contact visits was a core focus of the suggestions, including increasing both the time allocated to and frequency of these visits. With regard to the time allocated for both phone and video calls, this seemed to vary significantly among participants. The survey did not specifically ask respondents to specify the time allowed for phone or video calls; this information was provided incidentally, but it can be gleaned from these responses that most children had less contact time with the imprisoned person since the introduction of visiting restrictions than previously.

Some saw shortened time on phone/video calls as not particularly suitable for children:

Longer phone calls. 6 mins is not enough time for a child.

More face time, 25 min once a week not enough.

Video calls ... longer than 20 minutes.

Longer visiting sessions, because they start getting used to dad being on a screen and time's up.

The frequency of visits was also seen as problematic, with respondents calling for more video calls (e.g. a second Zoom call each week, especially for children under 12). Others noted some more specific and child-focused approaches that would improve non-contact visits, notably the times at which these are offered, as well as what can be done during these visits, to make them more child-friendly and accessible:

Daily access to phone during before and after school time for prisoners with children under 12.

Extend phone times – lock-in is 2 pm [and] school finishes at 3 pm.

Phone calls at night to say goodnight.

Allow inmates unrestricted call times e.g. goodnight/bedtime calls.

Also during the week so they can talk about what happen[ed] at school, instead of on a Sunday, when they do not have as much to chat about.

Some also suggested having a visit focused solely on children:

An extra video visit just for them.

Extra dedicated video visit solely for them, instead of having to share visit with adults.

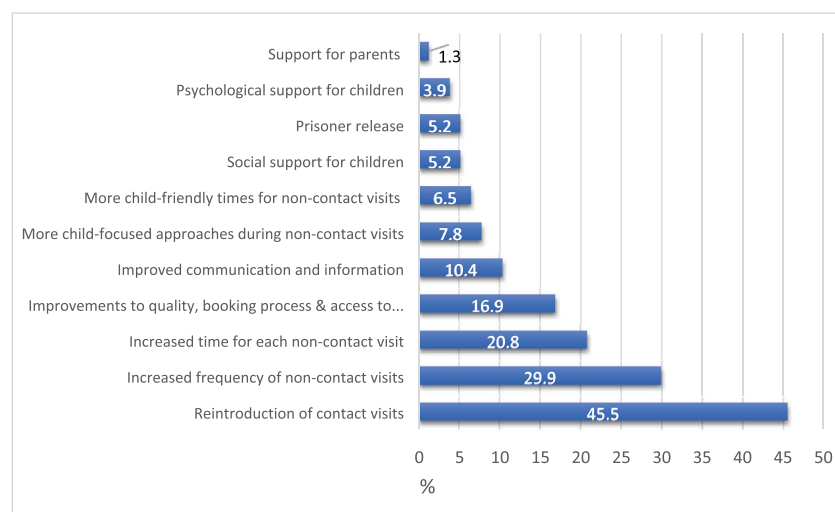


FIGURE 4 What is needed to support children during prison visiting restrictions ($n = 77$)

Maybe if the inmate has a children's book etc. to be able to read to the kids to help kids engage in the video call.

Getting their dad to read them a book and recording it.

6 | DISCUSSION

Whereas visiting is not a panacea for all family problems nor is it necessarily beneficial for all children, in many instances, visits between parents in prison and their children has been shown to support the parent-child relationship (Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014) and in some circumstances allow this to be rebuilt (Tasca, 2018). Visiting can help parents to retain a connection to their identity as a parent (Hutton, 2016) and enable better engagement with their children after release (e.g. see Visher, 2013).

Although regular and frequent visiting, supported by regular phone contact, was common among survey respondents, pre-COVID-19, consistent with previous research, those having to travel 2 h or more to the prison clearly experienced additional challenges, visiting less frequently. Considerable numbers of families (41.7%) fell into this category; of note is the additional burden for families in rural and remote areas, with Indigenous families disproportionately affected.

It is reasonable to assume that the introduction of video visiting would address the challenges of travel time/distance. However, though 75% of respondents reported having these visits with their imprisoned family member, poor or no access to videoconferencing at the prison was not uncommon ($n = 25$). And although phone calls, a well-established medium, were the most frequent and regular form of contact, ongoing problems with poor or no access were also described by one-quarter of respondents ($n = 21$). That so many carers reported problems is concerning, given that the suspension of face-to-face visits has meant that phone or video calling was the only real-time contact option. As noted earlier, videoconferencing between individuals in prison and their loved ones was not common practice in Australia prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, efforts to quickly introduce videoconferencing capabilities may have led to limited facilities being provided, with ad hoc procedures put in place to guide and promote their usage. It is also likely that these problems were shaped, at least in part, by specific prison practices. This has been noted to be the case in the United Kingdom (Prison Reform Trust, 2020), with good practices driven by the goodwill and interest of individual staff or centres, rather than on accepted and widespread best practice. Although it was beyond the remit of this study to examine such practices, it would seem pertinent for supportive and meaningful contact to be prioritized by prisons, given what is known about the short- and longer term benefits of family support for prisoners and their children, as discussed above. Where face-to-face visiting is not possible, prisons and staff should show commitment to alternatives, such as video visits, with resources provided to ensure regular and high-quality non-contact visits. Of specific concern are the families who need to travel longer distances and are at risk of less regular

contact; they should be given specific consideration, both in terms of additional support to enable visiting to occur and prioritizing for video visits.

Video visits, for some respondents, did address specific barriers to parent-child contact, by not having to travel or take children into what is known to be a hostile (e.g. see Ryan et al., 2020) and noisy (e.g. see Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014) prison environment. Correspondingly, some carers were positive about visits occurring in a calmer home environment. Despite this, more than one-third indicated that the non-contact visiting options, in particular video visits as the alternative to face-to-face visits, were not suited to children's developmental needs, especially for younger children. Some specifically noted that their children did not want to engage in such visits. Although this is in contrast to Horgan and Poehlmann-Tynan's (2020) suggestions about the suitability of this modality for children aged 0–8 years, nuanced data from our survey explain this more fully. Key problems described related to the timing of visits (sometimes only offered when children were away from the home, e.g. at school); the focus on verbal interaction, which was not engaging or meaningful, particularly for preschool-aged children; the shortness of these calls; and, importantly, the lack of physical connection.

Constructively, the data indicate that, where these issues could be addressed (physical contact aside), carers felt that the children and imprisoned person were able to engage more fully in the video visit; this also allowed a sense of normality and for parents and children to feel closer (Horgan & Poehlmann-Tynan, 2020). Examples of this were video calls being offered at a time when children were home and where the imprisoned family member was able to participate in child-focused interactions (e.g. children showing their artworks or activities in the home) or be a part of household routines (e.g. bedtime or reading a story together). That video visiting holds both possibilities and challenges is reflected in the analysis, which shows equivocal results with regard to carers' perceptions of the quality of parent-child contact during COVID-related visiting restrictions.

Whereas face-to-face contact is considered the most meaningful form of parent-child contact (Beckmeyer & Arditti, 2014), video visiting has the clear potential to support relationships between prisoners and their families, when in-person contact is not possible. To support parent-child contact, however, video visiting must be more tailored to children's needs. For prisons, this would involve offering these visits at times that are suitable to allow children to engage, for an amount of time that is appropriate for children, and that can focus on their normal activities and routines. The specific needs of children with disabilities warrant further attention and dedicated support.

There are also a range of obstacles that should be addressed for video visits to be beneficial, including dealing with unreliable technology, which may affect the quality of the video visit, as well as strained parent-caregiver relationships, which may act as a barrier to successful visits (Charles et al., 2021). Parents in prison and caregivers may benefit from additional support and/or a practical tip sheet for how to help their child participate in video visits and how to communicate with children via this medium, as well as what can be done ahead of time to prepare for these visits, such as having a book to read. Simple

video tutorials or infographic documents could be made available on the various correctional services websites that provide guidance to families of prisoners. Similarly, brief workshops and tip sheets could be provided to individuals in prison to help build their skills in preparation for video visits with children. Visit coaching has also been suggested as a way to enhance the quality of video visits between a child and their incarcerated parent (Charles et al., 2021; Peterson et al., 2019). Currently, little is done by correctional services to support carers. Arditti et al. (2021), based on their research with women carers, suggest that counselling or psychological support, provided by services with specialist knowledge of the justice system, may assist mothers in negotiating relationships and bolster their well-being and that of their children. It may also aid caregivers in making decisions around the type of contact that is most beneficial for the children in their care and how to support children during periods when that contact is unavailable.

Although not an evident issue in this study, being mindful of the impact of poverty on access to technology must also be taken into consideration. Given the often-high levels of disadvantage experienced by families of prisoners, families may also need support to access videoconferencing facilities in their communities if they are not readily available in their home. This could be achieved by prisons working together with community agencies to support families on the outside. Access to video visits could also be enhanced by using, for example, platforms that are freely accessible on a tablet or smartphone. They should also supplement, rather than replace, in-person visits (Cramer et al., 2017).

6.1 | Limitations

We recognize the limitations of our study. The sampling method meant that there was uneven representation across Australia. In addition, as discussed, only 13% of respondents reported problems visiting before COVID, which does not reflect the experiences detailed in the literature review. We also recognize that accessing respondents through NGOs may have skewed the sample towards those who are actively involved in visiting their family member in prison, and this is therefore likewise not representative of all incarcerated populations across Australia. Similarly, the survey was conducted online, which may have also limited our sample. Therefore, caution should therefore be exercised in drawing conclusions about the generalizability of our findings. Our online methodology also meant that we were unable to probe for further information in relation to our open-ended questions. It was also outside of the scope of this study to ask about individual prison operations. Further research is therefore required to explore in more detail how video conferences were experienced by children and their parent in prison and to compare and contrast specific prisons' practices with respect to video visits, especially across Australia's eight different correctional regimes. Nevertheless, as the first mixed-method study of the experiences of family members of a person in custody in Australia during COVID, our findings are instructive about the issues that arose for the families of people in prison as a result of the pandemic.

7 | CONCLUSION

This paper has provided detailed findings on the visiting experiences of children in Australia with a family member in prison, shedding light on such experiences before COVID-19 and, more critically, offering important insights into the implications of the restrictions imposed as a result of the pandemic. As it stands, video visits present a range of possibilities but also challenges, including the impact of digital poverty (Australian Council of Social Services, 2016; WHO, 2019) and the effects on children of a sustained lack of physical contact with their parent (Narvaez et al., 2019).

Although the cohort of people who completed this survey, and their children, were well engaged with the imprisoned person, having regular face-to-face visits and phone calls up until March 2020, the cancellation of all visits in response to COVID-19 had a considerable impact on family connectedness and well-being. A larger percentage of people reported having contact since restrictions were introduced, but it is evident that the video visits offered, and the overall lack of physical contact for children, have had a negative impact on families. This includes both children in the community and the imprisoned person. Furthermore, although 75% of carers reported having some contact via video visits, these were not readily available in all prisons. Families living more than 2 h away from prisons reported challenges that pre-date the COVID-19 restrictions, which do not seem to have been specifically identified and responded to with the range of non-contact visiting options available. Families with young children also present distinct needs and highlight the need to tailor non-contact options to ensure supportive and ongoing parent-child contact.

Overall, this study supports the use of video visiting, complementary to in-person visits, to support parent-child contact while a parent is in prison. However, it also raises a number of policy and practical implications; if videos are to live up to their potential, a range of actions are required. These include:

- a commitment from prison services to face-to-face visits as the main form of contact, where possible;
- specific attention to prioritizing video visits for families who live considerable distances from where their family member is imprisoned;
- tailoring video visits to children's needs, including the specific needs of children with disabilities;
- ensuring visits are of significant length to facilitate meaningful interaction; and
- consideration of skill building for both adults and children to ensure effective video visits with children.

The pandemic forced sudden changes on practically every aspect of modern life, and correctional systems were clearly not exempt from this. In Australia, as in many other countries, the rapid changes included expanding the use of technology to substitute for in-person family visits. The challenge now for correctional agencies is to reap the benefits such technologies can provide while acknowledging their limitations and recognizing that there is no substitute for a child being able to hug their incarcerated parent in person.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Catherine Flynn  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7645-3469>

Lorana Bartels  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2037-884X>

Susan Dennison  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7746-7974>

Helen Taylor  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3723-1094>

Susy Harrigan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1384-3969>

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